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RUEKJCS/JOINT STAFF WASHINGTON DC
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 VIENTIANE 000645

SIPDIS

STATE FOR EAP/MLS (EMERY),
SECDEF FOR OSD POLICY (CLAD, LAI),
PACOM FOR J52 (MILLER, KELLY, LACY),
JPAC FOR MUNIPALLI

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TAGS: [LA](#) [MARR](#) [MOPS](#) [PINR](#) [PREL](#) [MASS](#)

SUBJECT: U.S. DEFENSE ATTACHE OFFICE OPENS IN VIENTIANE

REF: VIENTIANE 0562

Classified By: Ambassador Ravic Huso for reasons 1.5 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: The new U.S. Defense Attache (DATT) to Laos, LTC Jamie McAden, was warmly welcomed by senior Lao military and Foreign Affairs officials December 5 to mark the opening of the U.S. Defense Attache Office in Vientiane. This restores the bilateral defense relationship with Laos broken at the end of the Indochina conflict in 1975. Exchanging DAOs had been proposed by the United States for many years and was finally agreed to by the Lao side in mid-2007 as part of our first International Military Education and Training (IMET) exchange. LTC McAden becomes the eighth DATT to be resident in Vientiane -- joining five ASEAN members, China and Russia. The Vice Defense Minister welcomed the "face-to-face" relationship with the U.S. military, something he said was possible because of the increasing political stability of Laos. End Summary.

¶2. (U) The U.S. Defense Attache Office (DAO) officially opened on December 5 at the U.S. Embassy in Vientiane. The Ambassador introduced U.S. Defense Attache (DATT) Lieutenant Colonel James "Jamie" McAden in courtesy calls with the Vice Minister of National Defense Major General Somphet Thipmala and Vice Foreign Minister Phongsavath Boupha that day to mark the DAO opening. LTC McAden was introduced to the broader Government of Laos (GOL), diplomatic, and international organization communities at a ceremonial reception that same evening at the Ambassador's Residence. The Lao Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) had formally accepted the DAO opening by issuing a diplomatic note on December 1 saying that the Ministry of National Defense (MND) "is agreeable to the appointment" of LTC McAden as DATT. The United States becomes the eighth country with a resident DATT in Vientiane; the others are Vietnam, Russia, China, Thailand, Indonesia, Cambodia, and Burma. The Indonesian DATT is currently dean of the Attache corps.

13. (C) MG Somphet was unusually relaxed at the formal courtesy call at MND, warmly welcoming LTC McAden to Vientiane just after the celebration of the 33rd anniversary year of the Lao People's Democratic Republic (LPDR) on December 2 and just before the 60th anniversary of the Lao People's Army (LPA) on January 20, 2009. According to MG Somphet, now that the military has helped achieve political stability in Laos, it is now able to take new steps and also has time to improve its structure, ideology, and technical issues such as living conditions, accommodations, and salaries for military personnel. Somphet referred to the more than 25 years of U.S.-Lao MIA cooperation as helping overcome the legacy of the war years and pledged continued GOL cooperation to bring back remains of the missing to the United States. He then highlighted the need of the Lao military to upgrade English language skills and said he hoped there would be opportunities for Lao military personnel to study English in the United States. MG Somphet noted that both militaries would benefit from having a positive and face-to-face relationship, a significant improvement from earlier points in which one side had criticized the other "from afar" via newspapers, radio, and television.

14. (C) COMMENT: Before assuming his current position, MG Somphet was from 1998-2005 Governor of the Saysomboun Special Zone, a large military-administered region northeast of Vientiane Municipality that contained the locus of insurgency

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action in Laos. From 2005-2007 he was then Governor of Vientiane Province which absorbed the majority of the Saysomboun Special Zone when the zone was rescinded and the territory returned to the civilian control of the surrounding provinces. In this context, post understood MG Somphet's reference to achieving political stability as indicating that the GOL no longer regards insurgent action as a significant threat. End comment.

15. (C) During an October visit (reftel) MG Somphet had told OASD DASD James Clad that the Lao DATT to the United States, COL Kenekeo Pholsena, would arrive in Washington, D.C. at the end of February, 2009. With enthusiasm, MG Somphet updated this information, telling the Ambassador and LTC McAden that COL Kenekeo would now arrive in "early February." COL Kenekeo is currently the Lao DATT in Beijing and will stay in Beijing to organize the LPA 60th anniversary ceremony there on January 20 before returning briefly to Laos and then proceeding to the United States. Both sides agreed the exchange of DATTs marked a historic step and a new chapter in our bilateral relationship.

16. (U) MG Somphet took note that LTC McAden would be returning to the United States for Lao language training and arrive back in Vientiane in June to take up his position permanently. In the interim, the U.S. DAO will be managed by DAO Operations Coordinator Senior Master Sergeant Georgia Royster. MG Somphet invited SMSGT Royster to call upon MND officials for any assistance she might require during this period.

17. (U) The Ambassador and LTC McAden also called on the Acting Director General of MND's External Relations Department, Colonel Phouthieng Kingkeo. At this meeting, the two sides reviewed in more detail mil-mil cooperation that has already begun, including military health training programs and other exchanges. COL Phouthieng affirmed that LTC McAden's experience would make our bilateral cooperation "even better." He promised that his Department would assist moving forward programs in those areas in which MND had approval to cooperate with the United States. For new program areas, the External Relations Department would request the required approval from MND's senior levels. COL Phouthieng also hosted lunch for the new U.S. DAO personnel and officers

from his Department to provide an additional opportunity for the two sides to get to know each other.

MFA

¶8. (SBU) The Ambassador presented LTC McAden to Vice Foreign Minister Phongsavath Boupha and to Ambassador Khouanta Phalivong, Director General of MFA's Europe and Americas Department. The VFM Phongsavath asked about the relationship between the new DAO and Detachment 3 of the Joint POW/MIA Accounting Command which already exists at the Embassy. The Ambassador specified that there would be no changes in JPAC's role in working with the GOL on MIA accounting; the DATT would be responsible for military cooperation including education and training, humanitarian assistance, medical and health exchanges, visits of U.S. military officials, and the travel of Lao military officials to conferences in the United States and the region.

¶9. (SBU) VFM Phongsavath raised the important issue of unexploded ordnance in Laos. He noted that Laos faced an enormous UXO problem -- with tons of "bombies" remaining from the war years -- and lacked the funding to clear the land resulting in continuing casualties. The Vice Foreign

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Minister expressed hope that there could be an exchange of U.S. military UXO experts with their MND counterparts to seek ways for future cooperation.

COMMENTS

¶10. (C) LTC McAden is the first U.S. DATT to the Lao People's Democratic Republic (LPDR), the regime established after the war in 1975. Despite the legacy of many war issues -- including the huge UXO issue -- and the fact that most of the senior Lao party leaders still in power fought against the United States in that conflict, the GOL has decided that the time has come to strengthen bilateral military relations with us. Mil-mil training programs during the past two years, principally led by the Pacific Air Force's Office of International Health on areas such as avian influenza, medical first responder training, CPR, and nursing, have been carried out smoothly and have been very well-received. More Lao military officers are attending programs in the United States and in the region, including the Chiefs of Defense (CHODs) conferences in 2007 and 2008, the 2008 Asia-Pacific Military Medicine Conference, as well as numerous programs offered by the Asia Pacific Center for Security Studies (APCSS) and the Center for Excellence in Disaster Relief (COE), both based in Honolulu. Two Lao military officers spent the summer of 2008 studying English at the Defense Language Institute (DLI) in San Antonio, the first Lao military students since 1975 under the International Military Education and Training (IMET) Program. One or both officers may wind up as staff members at the Lao DAO in Washington, D.C. in February 2009.

¶11. (C) The Lao DATT-designate for Washington D.C., COL Kenekeo, educated as a medical doctor, is not only very experienced, having been the Lao DATT in Burma and Indonesia before China, he is also a member of one of the most prominent families of Vientiane. He is one of twelve siblings who include among them:

a brother, Sommad, who is Minister of Public Works and Transport;

a sister, Khempheng, who is Minister to the Prime Minister's Office and Chair of the newly-established Water and Environment Administration as well as Minister for Economic Cooperation in the Greater Mekong Sub-region;

a sister, Khemmani, who is Vice Minister of Industry and

Commerce,

a brother, Sopone, who is Deputy Director General of the Lao Railway Organization, and

a sister, Khemphet, who has been Vice President of the Lao Women's Union, one of the three party mass organizations.
HUSO